

**Original citation:**

Wright, David, 1972- (2013) Review of Material nation : a consumer's history of modern Italy, by Scarpellini, E. Journal of Modern Italian Studies, Volume 18 (Number 3). pp. 377-379. ISSN 1354-571X

**Permanent WRAP url:**

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/56491>

**Copyright and reuse:**

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

**Publisher's statement:**

"This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in the Journal of Modern Italian Studies, Volume 18 (Number 3). pp. 377-379. ISSN 1354-571X, 2013, © Taylor & Francis, available online at:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/1354571X.2013.780363>"

**A note on versions:**

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRAP url' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: [publications@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:publications@warwick.ac.uk)



<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk>

Wright, D. (2013) review of Scarpellini, E., *Material Nation: A Consumer's History of Modern Italy*, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 18(3): 377-379.

DOI: 10.1080/1354571X.2013.780363

Emanuela Scarpellini, *Material Nation: A Consumer's History of Modern Italy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp.352, \$65, Hardback. (translated by Daphne Hughes and Andrew Newton)

This book traces the story of modern Italy from unification to the present day, through its consuming practices. It is wide-ranging in its subject matter and is eclectic in its approach, drawing on anthropological, sociological and historical perspectives and methods. These threads are woven together with a variety of forms of evidence including statistical data stretching back to the late nineteenth century - charting, amongst other things, the historical development of the Italian diet- as well as articles, novels and representations of Italian society from across the period. The sources are complemented with a kind of historical 'ethnography' that invites the reader to imagine accompanying the author as she is transported to the times and places under discussion. The focus for this technique is on the *spaces* of consumption and using it the author takes us, with evocative description, to the simple multi-family dwellings of late nineteenth century farm-workers, via the 'gadget-rich' home of a mid-twentieth century family to the 'architectural emptiness' of a more contemporary urban designer flat. Finally we are challenged to consider the gulf of experience and expectation of material culture that exists between a great-grandmother who has lived through the consumer transformations of the latter part of the Italian twentieth century and a wired-up, multi-tasking teenager who is perhaps less clearly *Italian* and more *networked* and *global* in his orientation. In all these depictions and others, this narrative device makes the book a lively and entertaining read and from it we get a strong sense of the abiding argument that consumer goods have transformed and been transformed by the values and everyday practices of Italians throughout the period in focus.

Along the way we get Italian-specific illustrations of the grand theoretical narratives that have accompanied the shift from consumption as the material satisfaction of needs in human societies down the ages ('Eat well, crap well and don't be afraid of death', says the late nineteenth century Tuscan peasant) to the more symbolic imaginary of a contemporary, Western European version of *consumer society* for which consumption is at least believed to hold all the possibilities of life itself. These tropes will be familiar to scholars of the sociologies of consumption and consumerism more generally but they are enlivened and enriched in this work by being placed in a distinct historical, geographical and cultural context. Thus we see Italian versions of Walter Benjamin's dream-world of goods or of Emile Zola's cathedrals of consumption in the development of the Italian department store, with Milan's Aux Villes d'Italie standing in for Paris' Bon Marché. We also see the conspicuous consumption of Veblen and the Bourdieuan account of the inter-relationships between personal taste and the broader social structure at work in the careful stylings of the mid-twentieth century Italian fashion industry. And finally we see

the Disneyization/Mcdonaldization of retail in the development of the Italian version of the shopping mall in the late twentieth century. In the Piazza Portici designer factory outlet, opened in 2000 near Alessandria and designed to replicate an 18<sup>th</sup> century Ligurian town centre, we see the hyper-reality of postmodern theorists of consumer societies, such as Baudrillard, brought home in the use of a re-imagined historical backdrop to display and sell today's luxury goods.

The book also presents us with an important reminder of the broader social, political and economic contexts in which consumer practices take place, with an account of the changing role of the Italian state as a kind of consumer of last resort in the provision of welfare and social services but also – specifically under fascism as Scarpellini describes it – in providing the impetus behind preferred forms of past-time and leisure or even new kinds of consumer goods. The mass motorization programme of the thirties and forties, for example, linked the strategic need for better roads with the propaganda value of prosperity and Italian engineering prowess. All these changes are laid out with their accompanying anxieties –again familiar from other times and places - that the values of consumerism are somehow a *threat* to the 'authentic' values of a culture or nation. Writers such as Luciano Biancardi and Italo Calvino are identified as expressing the apparently alienating, even terrifying, consequences of the rise of consumer culture as it has been decried by intellectuals down the ages. Such anxieties are also shown, at least in part, to be overcome as Italians negotiate, re-claim and re-imagine their culture and themselves in relation to the goods and services they consume.

Cultural histories of taste of this kind might run the risk of being studies of *everything* and this contribution does range permissively around its topic, encompassing discussion of food, fashion, travel, tourism, interior design and shopping practices. Some specialist scholars within these more restricted fields might be irritated by a skipping quality to the story that this breadth provides but, whilst it is occasionally distracting, it also allows some appealing links and commonalities across these fields to emerge. The 'consumption' of the body, for example, which begins the final chapter on contemporary everyday life in Italy links consumer body management practices with ancient rituals of display and adornment. It provides a pleasing narrative conclusion to a book which offers a convincing argument about the central role of the practices of consumption in shaping contemporary Italian institutions, politics, economics but also, at the most banal and personal level, Italian *identities*. The book will be of use to both scholars of Italian culture and international scholars of taste and - should a more affordable version emerge - might well be a sophisticated introduction to the cultural nuances of contemporary Italy for undergraduates in Italian Studies.

David Wright, Centre for Cultural Policy Studies, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK.